

Morality and wellbeing

Suikkanen, Jussi

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Morality and Wellbeing

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Synonyms

Ethics, obligations, right and wrong (from the Latin word 'moralitas' meaning 'manner' or 'proper behaviour'); quality of life, welfare, prudential value, good life, what is good for a person.

Definition

The notion of wellbeing is one of the most fundamental concepts in moral philosophy. When moral philosophers discuss wellbeing, they are interested in what are the most basic elements of good lives.

The positive morality of a society is the set of moral norms which the members of that society share. It is likely that there is a connection between the positive morality of a society in this sense and wellbeing. This is because societies whose moralities promote wellbeing are more likely to survive and thrive in the evolutionary competition (see Joyce 2006).

However, the main research focus of moral philosophers is not morality in this anthropological sense. Rather, ethicists are more interested in which acts really are right and which ones wrong. This normative investigation is based on the assumption that the widely held moral beliefs of a society can be mistaken. Throughout the history of ethics, most moral philosophers have agreed that there is an intimate connection between what constitutes a good life and what we ought to do morally speaking. However, what this connection exactly is continues to divide opinions.

Description

On the most general level, there are three main positions concerning what the connection between morality and wellbeing is. The first of these alternatives is a family of views which all begin by first specifying a notion of wellbeing that is independent of any moral considerations. These views then attempt to capture the standards of right and wrong with the help of that notion.

When it comes to the philosophical views about wellbeing in this morally neutral sense, there are three main alternatives (Parfit 1984, app. I). The so-called hedonist theories of wellbeing claim that wellbeing consists of the balance of pleasures and pains over time where pleasures are understood as intrinsically pleasant experiences or as experiences one desires to have (for a more sophisticated version of hedonism, see Feldman 2004). The so-called preference-satisfaction theories, in contrast, claim that wellbeing consists of the satisfaction of one's idealised self-regarding preferences (Brandt 1979, ch. 13). Finally, the so-called objective list theories provide a list of goods the having of which makes our lives go better independently of our attitudes towards the goods on the list (Griffin 1986). The list of goods provided by the defenders of these views usually includes things like friendship, health, knowledge, autonomy, achievement, and so on.

There are various ways in which such ethically neutral conceptions of wellbeing can be used to capture what is right and wrong. Here the assumption is that the content of the correct ethical standards refers to the wellbeing of people. For example, egoists have always thought that morally right actions maximise the agent's own wellbeing over her lifetime. This means that, according to the egoists, the demands of prudence and morality perfectly overlap. Such views use wellbeing as a currency to compare how good the agent's different options are for her both prudentially and morally speaking. The traditional arguments for the egoist views are often based on the thought that, because agents cannot be motivated by anything other than their own well-being, therefore promoting their own wellbeing is the only thing that can be required of them.

Consequentialists, in contrast, claim that, when it comes to the rightness and wrongness of our acts, everyone's wellbeing matters equally (for a locus classicus, see Mill 1998 [1861]). Hence, most consequentialists believe that one ought to always act in the way that maximises the total amount of wellbeing in the world generally. This view is motivated by the thought that, if wellbeing is what matters fundamentally, then it cannot be morally relevant whose wellbeing happens to be in question (Mill 1998 [1861], pp. 81–82).

The notion of wellbeing can also be used to construct more sophisticated views in ethics and political philosophy. According to some people, wellbeing can, for example, be used as the currency which can be used to weigh the strength of the ethical claims of different parties in the conflicts of interests. On such views, making a decision about whether to adopt a new health care policy, for example, requires first investigating what kind of effects the policy would have on the wellbeing of those who will be affected by it, and then comparing whether the improvements on one group's quality of life would justify sacrificing the wellbeing of others (see Broome 2004). This framework has led to interesting discussions about whether and how wellbeing could be measured for the purposes of the previous kind of quantitative comparisons (Tiberius & Plakias 2010). Finally, some political philosophers have argued that, in so far as states should treat their citizens equally, they should promote the wellbeing of everyone equally or at least guarantee everyone equal opportunities for wellbeing (Cohen 1989).

The morally neutral notions of wellbeing can also be used to construct more complex pluralist ethical views. There is a tradition of thought according to which we are faced with inevitably conflicting demands on us (Crisp 1996). For example, one fairly intuitively appealing view of this kind claims that prudence requires us to promote our own wellbeing whereas morality creates a competing demand on us to promote the wellbeing of others. Some philosophers have argued that, in this situation, all we can do is to deal with such conflicts case by case. However, many important works in moral philosophy have attempted to show that, in fact, there is no conflict between the demands of prudence and morality (Plato 1994 [c. 370BC], Gauthier 1986). If such proofs could be carried out successfully, then one would be able to make one's own life go best by complying with the moral standards that aim at promoting everyone's wellbeing.

The second broad category of views holds that it is impossible to give a plausible account of the wellbeing of an individual independently of considering what is right and wrong. In the Aristotelian tradition, this type of views often hold that acting morally is a fundamental constituent of a good life, and therefore wellbeing cannot be understood without taking into account what morality requires from us. The following will be just a brief outline of one such view (see Aristotle 2009 [c.

350BC], Foot 2001). There are, of course, many different ways to develop the views of this type further.

Aristotelians often begin from the thought that living a good life requires being able to participate successfully in the activities that are specific to one's species. One fundamental activity that is typical for human beings is living together with others in political communities. What is moral and just is then understood in terms of the excellences that enable one to interact with others successfully in one's community.

This view means that acting morally cannot be merely instrumental for living one's life successfully in one's community. Rather, if the view is correct, then doing so is constitutive of living well the kind of a social life that is natural for human beings. For this reason, Aristotelians tend to consider acting morally to be constitutive of living a good human life. This also explains why, according to them, wellbeing cannot be understood independently of morality (see Kraut 2007).

So, in summary, much of the work in moral philosophy has focused on attempting to capture the intimate connection between morality and wellbeing. However, it is fair to say that not everyone has been convinced that there even is a connection between the two notions. Immanuel Kant, for example believed that the moral worth of one's actions depends only on the universal form of one's willing (Kant 1998 [1785]). This is because the moral nature of one's actions must be something one can control. In contrast, one's wellbeing and happiness depend much more on one's luck – on whether the world happens to co-operate in the satisfaction of one's will. This somewhat arbitrary nature of wellbeing and happiness is why Kant thought that these notions cannot be fundamental ethical notions.

More recently, T.M. Scanlon has provided an interesting new argument to the conclusion that the notion of wellbeing cannot play an important role in ethical theorising (Scanlon 1998, ch. 3). According to Scanlon, wellbeing is a 'transparent' good. That is, when we plan our lives from our first-personal deliberative perspectives, we rarely consider wellbeing as such but rather what projects we have reasons to pursue. Many of these rational aims we adopt will contribute to our wellbeing but often whether this is the case is rather vague and not very important for us.

If Scanlon is correct about this, then it is not clear whether wellbeing could be used as a currency to compare the strength of our ethical claims either. Rather, in this situation, it seems that what duties towards other people we have should, instead of wellbeing, be more sensitive to the basic first-order moral considerations such as whether others are harmed or benefitted in some specific ways that matter to them. Some of these morally salient considerations will be related to wellbeing whereas others will not be so in any obvious way.

Cross-References

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